

(U) Ask Zelda!: Suffering from Neglect on Planet Schmooze

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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(U) The below article is unclassified in its entirety.



I have a question/problem for Zelda. My supervisor spends hours (sometimes 3 or more) each day chatting with one of her subordinates. It is always the same subordinate and they also get together socially outside of work. It doesn't bother me that they two are obviously friends, but what does bother me, and other coworkers, is that we often can't get in to speak to the supervisor about work related issues because you-know-who is in there having a chat. Also, we are a busy office and people are beginning to speculate whether these two have enough work to do with all of this chatting going on. Any suggestions on how to handle this?

-- Frustrated

Dear Frustrated,

I'm guessing that as a child, you were taught that it's rude to interrupt someone's conversation. Perhaps your parents even drilled into your head "children should be seen and not heard." I never understood why...

Anyway, this is one instance when I think assertiveness is called for. News flash -- it is not always rude to interrupt! Think of it this way: if the building were on fire and she didn't hear the alarm, she'd want you to interrupt her chat -- wouldn't she?

If you need to speak to your supervisor and she is talking to her friend, give them a reasonable amount of time to finish their conversation (5 or 10 minutes?) and then break in. Knock on the door or stick your head into her cubicle and say something like, "Excuse me, I'm sorry to interrupt but I need an answer on this right away/this morning/before I can proceed." She will probably say, "Sure, we were just wrapping up" or "Give me five minutes and I'll be out to see you." Alternatively, you could say, "Sorry to interrupt, but could you please come by my desk when you're free? I have an issue I need your guidance on."

If the door is closed and you're too timid to knock, call her on the phone! She can always say, "I've got someone in with me right now, I'll call you back" if she doesn't want to end her conversation.

Either way, the two of them will get the message that mission needs her attention and they will curtail their discussion. If you and your co-workers do this every time you need your supervisor, she will realize that her office requires her leadership and will probably start being more available to you; but if you never break in on these chats, she will think the office is running fine without her and continue shooting the breeze with her friend to pass the time. Furthermore, if her friend is the chatty one, your supervisor may even appreciate the interruption as an excuse to politely extract herself from the

conversation.

You know, this makes me think of a new adage for the workplace. How about "supervisors should be seen and not heard"? 😊

-Zella
